2:Seligman & Seligman E-5 (1909-1910) 1932
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Death and Funeral Ceremonies

The Shilluk idea of the spiritual make-up of man is neither simple nor easy to understand. Every living man has both *wei* and *tipo*, the former signifying "breath", "life", the latter "shadow", "image", as in water or mirror. We have already referred to the *cen* of one dying in anger and malevolence (p. 97), and there is a word *aneko*, meaning ghost, i.e. the spirit of one dead. So far we are reasonably certain of our facts, but there may be an element called *winyo* (lit. bird) of whose functions we can predicate nothing.

No death occurred in the villages we visited whilst we were among the Shilluk.

According to Hofmayr, death may be hastened when there is much suffering or if the agony is long drawn out. He states that a prolonged period of immobility of the body is taken for death; the women immediately begin to wail, the dying man is declared dead, his face is covered with a cloth, and the grave is dug.[1] Burial is at full length, a few paces from the door of the house in which the deceased lived. The grave is dug by old men, mostly relatives. A skin is placed in the grave and the body laid upon it wrapped in a white cloth (this is a recent introduction) and covered with another skin. The position of the hands is uncertain; we were told that they were laid between the knees, and also that they were placed in front of the face. Nothing is buried with the corpse, but later a hole is made near and objects placed in it.

Westermann's text, from which the following account is taken, is of special interest as it contains minute details of Shilluk behaviour; it is, however, too long for inclusion and we give only the salient features. It should be noted that his description applies to rich and important men; with a single exception the graves that we saw had no cattle horns on them, and we believe that for a poor man cattle are not always killed. The use of a bier is not invariable:—

When a man dies two fowls are killed, one being placed at the head of the deceased. An ox and a goat are also sacrificed. Beads are tied round the ankles of the men who prepare the grave:—

> "The man is buried thus: Some men dig the hole, and some men skin the cow [ox in the early part of the account] . . . the hide is cut into strips, and a bier is [made] . . ., his wife is called, she is to hold the feet of the dead man, and the man is laid on the bier. His wife (or: the women belonging

[1] Op. cit., 299.

3:Westermann E-5 (1910) 1912 FJ23 Shilluk FJ23

INHERITANCE

The sons inherit the property of their father. The wives of the deceased father are divided among the children, who may, and in most cases do, marry them, except their own mother. It is said that sometimes, when a husband is very old and infirm, his wives put him to death, in order to get a younger companion. On inheritance vide page 113.

DANCING AND WAR-PLAYS

Their chief amusement is dancing. The houses of a village are built in a circle, leaving an open place in their midst. Here the inhabitants assemble in the evening, stretching themselves in the warm ashes or on a skin, or squatting on a piece of ambach; several small fires of cow dung are burning and spread a smoke of strong smell, which is the best protection from mosquito-stings. The events of the day are discussed here, the tobacco pipe and merisa pot going from hand to hand. In the middle of this open place the trunk of a large tree is erected, in which the drums are suspended. With them signals are given in times of danger, but more frequently they are used to accompany the dances of the young people. These public dances are among the greatest events in the lives of the young Shilluks; even old men and women, though not taking an active part, are highly interested in them; sitting before the huts in front of the dancers they constitute a chorus, who accompanies the transactions of the younger generation with loud acclamations or blamings. The dances generally take place during the dry season; they begin at about four o'clock in the afternoon, or, in case there is moonshine, later in the evening, and last from three to five hours or longer. As a rule one village invites its neighbours by a drum signal given in the early morning of the day fixed for a dance. On hearing this signal the young people show a great zeal in preparing their body, hairdress and the ornaments worn on the occasion. They go to the village in groups or single, men and girls separately. Usually the youths perform some war-dance in full arms at first, in which the girls do not partake; they form a large circle in four or two rows, and while the drum is being beaten, begin dancing and singing war songs. The dance consists in jumping on the toe and at the same time moving slowly forward. These rhythmical movements are from time to time interrupted by a group of dancers violently rushing out of the circle, howling and shouting aloud, brandishing their spears with fierce looks, and performing mock fights or playing pantomimes, in which they exhibit very remarkable ability. Scenes from the hunting, pastoral and agricultural life are represented with such a dramatic vivacity that they richly deserve the applause they earn.

On a given signal, spears, clubs and shields are laid aside and put together in one place, and now the second part, in which the girls partake, begins. The latter have till then been waiting in a separate place, where the female lookers-on are gathered. Each girl selects her own dancer. First the men form again a

29:Dempsey M-5 (1940-1954) 1955
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134 struggling at each step to free oneself from the clinging mud underneath. Long after the rains have ceased the swamp remains, only drying up gradually under the heat of the sun and through drainage into the river, until by mid-December the moisture has all been drawn from the earth, and the bright green grass which has covered it during the rains begins to turn yellow and wither.

797 If my new home was no Eden of beauty, neither was it one free from labour and toil. The territory covered by the mission is, I discovered, quite large. In length it is about 70 miles, extending from Kaka, 55 miles to the north, to a point 15 miles south of Detwok; inland it stretches 15 miles [361] from the river where the Shilluk villages farthest from the river are to be found. The 'parish' thus comprises roughly an area of 1,050 square miles and it is a formidable task for two priests to administer it, especially as the most speedy [493] means of transport available is the push bicycle. However, [771] most of the Christians, who at that time were by no means numerous, lived in the villages near the mission, and large areas were without habitation of any kind, so that the task of parochial visitation did not prove as onerous as it might at first appear. The Shilluk are inveterate wanderers and [166] often drift from the villages in which they were born and baptized as far north as Kaka, or inland to the limits of inhabited country. There they will remain for years quite out of touch with the mission and Christian influence, for rarely if ever do they come in to hear Mass and receive the Sacraments. With all the good will in the world it is impossible for two priests, one with the many affairs of the mission to attend to and the other fully occupied in the school, to keep track of these nomads and follow them in their 763 wanderings. But their heavenly mother, Mary, does not for- 797 get them at the hour of their death, and many is the time that a message from a vigilant catechist, or word brought casually by a passing traveller, or, more often than not, a request for a burial cloth from the pagan relatives of the dying Christian sends the priest post-haste a journey of 15 or 20 miles, in the dry season by bicycle, in the rains on foot, to bring the

29:Dempsey M-5 (1940-1954) 1955
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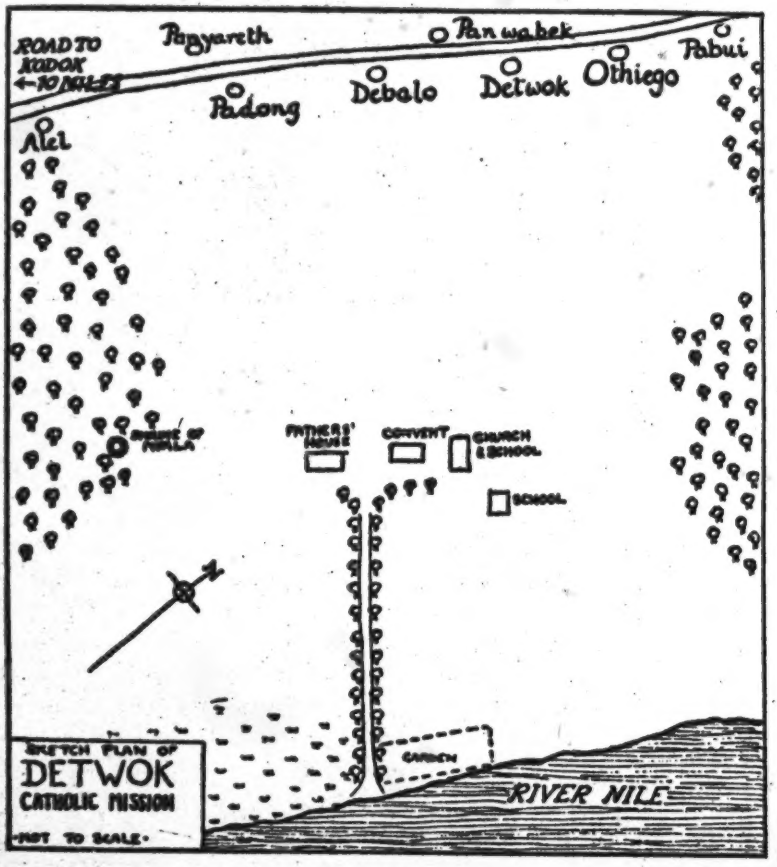

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last consolations of religion to these poor brethren of Christ. 797 763

After a month or so of my stay in Detwok I was happily settled in my new home, and was beginning to find my way about both in the district and—what was more difficult—in the Shilluk tongue. Although my activities were mainly confined to the classroom, occasionally I was able to escape from the trammels of schoolwork and spend a morning touring round some part of the mission. A morning of visiting 797 123

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mony?' asked the priest. 'Once,' promptly answered the catechumen, and then cautiously amended his answer, 'perhaps twice.' 'Oh,' said the Father, 'why only twice?' 'If a man marries and his wife dies, he can marry again, can't he?' 'Ye-es,' conceded the boy, 'he can marry again.' 'And if that second wife dies,' continued the Father, 'can't he marry a third time?' 'No,' said the boy. 'Why not?' 'Because he has no cows left' was the triumphant and conclusive reply. And that fairly well sums up the Shilluk's attitude towards matrimony. In common with the rest of his African brethren he is by inclination polygamous. In Africa nothing adds more to one's prestige than a multiplicity of wives. Fortunately, however, from our—the Catholic missionaries'—standpoint the tribe as a whole is of necessity monogamous. Except in the case of wealthy chiefs or fathers who rejoice in a quiverful of daughters to bring cattle into the family byre and no sons to take them out, the people generally are too poor to be able to scrape together the necessary cattle to provide for a second wife.

When a man dies his wife is not thereby released from her matrimonial obligations and free either to re-marry or to remain a widow. She is, as has been said, something that has been bought and paid for, part of the dead man's property, and is inherited together with the rest of his effects. If she is not the mother of the deceased's eldest son he will claim her, or if she is his mother or there is no son, or none old enough to marry, she will be taken by her brother-in-law or some other member of her husband's family. She belongs to that family and must remain in it to fulfil her duties as a wife and a mother to some member of it. If it so happened that there were no relative, no matter how remote, of her husband who could inherit her, then she might marry again outside it, but only on condition that a dowry is forthcoming to compensate her husband's family.

* * *

A death among the Shilluk is the signal for an outburst of wailing on the part of the women. It is a high, shrill, screaming

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763 sound that is prolonged for about ten minutes and is renewed at intervals during the day as relatives or friends of the deceased arrive for the funeral.

[166] I have said previously that the Shilluk are fond of wandering from their own villages. They will settle and live for years at the other end of the country, perhaps among the people of another tribe or in another province. But no matter how long a man has been away from his own people, he will always endeavour to return to die among them, and if he should fall ill whilst away from home he will try to let his kinsfolk know in order that they may come and fetch him, or will have himself carried back. If, however, he should die 766 away from home the news of his death is greeted with the customary wailing, and some member of his family must visit his grave and bring back some of the earth from it; this is buried near the dead man's home and the funeral ceremonies are enacted over it as though the corpse itself were present.

761 It is the Shilluk tradition that the king should not be 682 permitted to die a natural death, but should be ceremoni- [643] ously smothered by his womenfolk. The same is true of a chief, but whether the reasons for the killing in this case are the same as those which decide the death of the king is not clear. Certainly a chief who had been ill for a month and showed no signs of recovery would be speedily put out of the way.

[888] The custom seems to extend to other cases too; an old man would be smothered as also would be one suffering from a long and painful illness, and the same is done too, in some cases at least, shortly before death would take place naturally. I myself saw a dying boy being smothered by his own mother. She propped him up between her knees and passed her hand over his nose and mouth. I thought that she was wiping away the mucus that was coming from his nose and mouth, and it was only when he had ceased to breathe that I realized to my horror that she had killed him. When questioned about the reasons for this 'mercy' killing the Shilluk are vague and evasive. They say, for instance, that it is a humiliation for anyone to die naturally.

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this particular place at this particular time, and his worth, not as a teacher, or an eloquent preacher, or a clever theologian, or even as a zealous missionary whose ardour is being continually damped by the lack of response to his best efforts, but simply as a man in whom God has vested great powers in order that He may use him as the instrument for the salvation of some obscure native dying in a dismal hut in a small unknown village on the bank of the Nile.

Sickness and death do not study the convenience of the missionary either as to time or place, so he must be prepared to go at any time to any place that it is humanly possible to reach, whatever be the risk or inconvenience to himself; and although not usually fraught with peril, sick calls do have the habit of coming in at the most awkward times and from the most inaccessible of places. It may happen that the priest is alone in the mission and is perhaps in the middle of morning school when the summons comes from a village maybe ten or fifteen miles away. A catechist has come across a man, baptized many years ago in Detwok, but long since drifted from the district, who is sick and dying in a remote village on the other side of Kodok, and now sends in a messenger to inform the priest. Or, as often happens, the mission hears of it only because the pagan relatives of the dying man have sent in, not to summon assistance, but merely to beg a cloth to use as a shroud for his burial. Whatever way the news has come in, the priest acts promptly; he hurriedly hands over his class to the Sister next door, or gives it sufficient work to keep it busy—if not happy—for the remainder of the morning. From the house he picks up his sick-call case, hurries to the chapel for the Blessed Sacrament and, if the state of the roads permits, is away on his bicycle in a matter of minutes. If the rains are on and cycling is impossible, he changes his shoes and stockings for a pair of rubber pumps and sets out across the fields and through the swamps in the general direction of the main road and Kodok.

He arrives at that important administrative and commercial centre (the Assistant District Commissioner's residence and office, a prison, a dispensary and half a dozen Arab-

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* 797 shops) in about an hour if he is on his bicycle, but if he is
[632] on foot he will be two-and-a-half to three hours on the road.
[648] He looks around for the catechist and eventually finds him on the outside of the prison fence, chatting through the wire to some of his friends on the other side who have had the misfortune to be found out. The catechist jumps up when he sees the priest approaching and hurries to meet him and assure him that the man is still alive and very anxious to see him. He tells him that the village is but a short distance away (actually it turns out to be the best part of four miles through the forest behind Kodok), and proceeds to conduct him thither through a labyrinth of paths and tracks.

Eventually they arrive at the village, a huddle of half-a-dozen miserable huts, and cross to the one where the sick man is lying. Several mangy pi-dogs drowsing in the sun rouse up at the entrance of the stranger and make their usual attack. The priest crawls through the narrow entrance
[342] into the hut and coming from dazzling sunlight into semi-darkness, for there are no windows in the hut and the grass mat that was removed from the door to give him entrance has been replaced, it takes him some time to accustom himself to his surroundings. He tells someone squatting near the entrance to remove the mat from the door, since besides the lack of light there is also a decided lack of air, and the temperature, high enough outside, is well nigh unbearable inside. Furthermore there is a haze of smoke from a long
[276] Shilluk pipe which is being handed round the visitors to the
[515] sick bed, and an unbelievable stench arising from foul tobacco, decaying fish and unwashed, oiled and ash-smeared Shilluk bodies.

The first thing the priest does is to clear the place of its occupants—including the fish. He is relieved to find that the young woman suckling a baby is not the sick man's wife; indeed he has not got a wife, so that is one complication the less, anyway. Then, soaked with perspiration and blinded by the drops that run down into his eyes, he turns to the
● 763 motionless bundle of rags lying on a skin on the floor. The
* 797 man is conscious and evidently glad that the priest has come.

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With a little help from the priest and a great deal left to the compassionate understanding of God, he makes his confession and receives his first absolution for years. Then the priest unbuttons the pocket of his shirt and takes from it a leather case, containing a gold box, that he has been carrying suspended by a cord round his neck. There is no table with spotless white cloth, crucifix, lighted candles and flowers, nothing but the bare earth floor: so he places a small corporal on the crown of his sun helmet and reverently lays the pyx down on it. The catechist who returned after the man had made his confession raises him up while the priest gives him Holy Viaticum. Then the priest goes on to administer the Sacrament of Extreme Unction, but first he must find a clean spot on each limb that he can anoint, so he wipes the grimy hands and feet with a piece of cotton wool soaked in water. With his thumb smeared with the holy oil he proceeds with the anointing: 'By this holy anointing and of His own most tender mercy, may the Lord forgive thee the sins thou hast committed . . .' he murmurs, as in turn he makes the sign of the Cross on eyes, ears, nostrils, lips, hands and feet. The sick man has already drifted into unconsciousness and only the faint breathing and an occasional twitch of his hand show that he is still alive, and it is obvious that the end cannot be long delayed. The anointing finished, the priest carefully cleanses his thumb with a piece of cotton wool, and burns it, together with the wool that he used during the anointing. There remains now but one more thing, the Apostolic Blessing. This is quickly given and then he closes his sweat-stained ritual and slips it, together with his stole, into his bag, and at last is free to quit that stifling atmosphere for the comparative coolness outside. The pagans grouped outside the hut eye him curiously as he stands for the moment dazzled by the sun, but offer no comment save that one opportunist seizes the chance to try and beg a piastre, and failing that, a pipeful of tobacco. The priest wipes his streaming face with his now grimy handkerchief and, bidding the little group farewell, makes his way out of the village, accompanied as usual by

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763 the snarling dogs. He and the catechist have not gone far on
* 797 their way towards Kodok, when the shrill wailing of women breaks out in the village they have just left; the man has died. The priest stops for a moment and commends the departed soul to God and then continues on his road.

* 797 In Kodok he meets with a disappointment. It is two p.m. and he had hoped to find his friend the Assistant District Commissioner at home, but he is out on trek in his district and so all hopes of a refreshing wash, followed by a still more refreshing bottle of cold beer and lunch, vanish. He stops for a while and rests in the shade outside the shop of one of the merchants, and is offered and gratefully accepts a glass of tepid, sickly sweet lemonade. At last, with a sigh, he throws away his cigarette and reluctantly pulls himself to his feet, to cover the ten miles that lie between him and a bath, a meal and a luxurious stretch in a deck chair.

Not all sick calls have the same happy ending as that just described. Sometimes the priest makes a long and tiring journey to find that the person he has come to see was suffering from an imaginary sickness, or else has made a miraculous recovery and has gone off to put in some work in his field, or for a day's fishing. Sometimes, alas! he arrives too late, and finds only a newly-made grave.

763 On one occasion I had been wandering through some
* 797 villages in the evening and made a last call, just at sunset, at
[1CA] Pabiu. Here by chance I found a youth, shrunken and wasted by tuberculosis and obviously ill beyond recovery. He had been sick, I was told, for the past six months and had recently been brought from a village inland where he had been living for the past several years, in order that he might die in his own village. He was not a Christian, but had been a pupil at the mission school some years previously, and he still remembered some of his catechism, and asked to be baptized. Since he was quite cheerful and lively in spite of his illness, there did not seem to be any immediate danger of death so I promised that I would return the following evening to instruct and baptize him. He assented cheerfully,

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and so we parted. The next evening, after tea, I mounted my bicycle and pedalled leisurely towards the village. Half-way there I met the father of one of the school boys, and we chatted for a few minutes about the progress, or rather lack of progress, his son was making. Then he asked me casually where I was going, and I replied just as casually that I was going to Pabiu to baptize so-and-so. 'So-and-so?' he said. 'He died half an hour ago.' I stared at him in amazement for a moment, and then, jumping on my bike, pedalled furiously to the village. It was only too true. I could hear the shrill crying of the women as I approached. The men were digging the grave and the body, not yet cold, had been prepared for burial. Whether the lad had been 'helped' out of this world, I could not say; I baptized him conditionally, and could but commend him and his good intentions to the mercy of God. Then, sick at heart, I rode slowly back to the mission.

One does not easily associate humour with the administration of the Sacraments to a person who is dying, but sometimes there can be, in retrospect, a funny side even to these solemn and awful occasions. Mention has been made in a previous chapter of Rachael, the old blind leper woman of Pabiu. Poor Rachael was long a-dying, and weary though she must have been of this world she had hung on to life long beyond anybody's expectation. I had long since given her the last Sacraments and every day expected to hear that she had gone to heaven. One morning the Sister told me that the old woman did seem to be near her end and probably would not last the morning, so I went across to Pabiu to render her what assistance I could in her agony. The entrance to a Shilluk hut is a round hole no more than waist high so that one wishing to enter must bend double or even go on hands and knees to do so. Furthermore, the inside of the hut is in semi-darkness, and entering from the bright sunlight it takes a moment or two to accustom oneself to the surroundings. Hence, when I ducked through the doorway, I almost pitched headlong over a shapeless bundle

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763 lying right across the entrance. It was poor Rachael who
797 had been stretched out across the threshold where anyone entering the hut could not fail to step on or fall over her.
521 Sitting against the wall opposite the entrance were four ancient-looking hags who were simply passing the time away in gossip whilst waiting for the old woman to die. When I made my undignified entrance, one of the unlovely quartette, Rachael's daughter, said, 'Get up, Rachael. Here's the Father and he has brought you a burying cloth.' Said I, 'I haven't brought a burying cloth.' Chorus from the four beauties: 'He hasn't brought a cloth, Rachael; don't get up.' To me, 'What have you brought?' 'I have come to give her a blessing.' 'Oh! He's come to give you a blessing, Rachael; don't get up.' At this point poor Rachael dimly understood that someone had come to give her something, so she asked me to put it in her hand and not let the others get it.

I thought that I had better get on with the good work, and blessing the hut and Rachael with holy water, I began to recite the Litany of the Dying. Half-way through, there was an interruption from the daughter: '*Jal duong*'—a
514 pause whilst she spits, across Rachael and through the doorway; a good ten feet.

Myself: 'What?'

Daughter: '*Yi bi.*'

576 This normal Shilluk greeting often comes, not when first meeting a person, but halfway through the conversation or visit. I said something more than my prayers, while the four resumed their gossip and spitting.

Daughter: '*Jal duong, Jal duong.*'

Myself: 'All ye Holy Virgins and Widows—Shut up.'

Daughter: 'O-oh! He says: "Shut up," and I was going to tell him that I went to the Sister to tell her that my mother was dying and to ask for a cloth to bury her in.'

At length, without further interruption I finished the prayers for the Dying, and gave poor Rachael one final blessing and prepared to depart. The four beldams followed me out of the hut, and the following conversation resulted:

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Daughter: 'Jal duong.'
Myself: 'What?'
Daughter: 'When are you coming back with the cloth?'
Myself: 'I am not coming back with a cloth.'
Daughter: 'Oh! Shall I come to the mission to get it?'
Myself; 'No; I have no cloth.'
Daughter: 'Oh! Have you any tobacco?'
Myself: 'No, I have no tobacco.'
Daughter: 'Oh! Are you going now?'
Myself: 'Yes, I am going now.'
Final Chorus: 'He is going now, Rachael, and he hasn't brought a cloth to bury you in, and he hasn't any tobacco. Don't get up.'

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In the same village of Pabiu was another ancient lady, Amelia. Amelia had been baptized many years before the Mill Hill Fathers came to the Sudan, but she had long since given up all practice of her religion, and for some reason or other was bitterly antagonistic to the mission and all that it stood for, jeering at those Christians who did come to Mass and the Sacraments, and trying to prevent children from coming to the school. During the weeks preceding Easter we had had a round-up of the district, reminding the lazy and indifferent of the approaching Feast and of their Easter duties. The Parish Priest had visited Pabiu and had seen and chatted to Amelia. Some word cheerily spoken, or some little kindness he had shown her touched the old woman's heart and the grace of God did the rest. She promised that she would come to make her Easter duties, and she was as good as her word. I was agreeably surprised when she came to confession before Mass on Easter Sunday and later received Holy Communion. A fortnight later word came that Amelia was very ill, having caught a chill which developed into pneumonia. I took the familiar path to Pabiu to see her, and it was obvious at once that her hours were numbered. She had been carried out of her hut into the small compound in front and was lying in the afternoon sun, propped up against the reed palisade. To hear her

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763 confession was an easy task now, and I gave her Holy
*797 Viaticum and then proceeded to anoint her. As I did so she stirred feebly, tried to raise herself up and twisted her shoulder towards me. 'Father,' she said 'put some there. That's where the pain is.'

*797 Epidemics sometimes visit the district and then the
[731 missionary is very busy indeed. Devastating though they
164] may be, carrying off both young and old, the strong as well as the weak, they can have a chastening effect on the lazy, indifferent and careless. On one occasion I stood in the dark behind a hut, whilst mosquitoes in their thousands whined and buzzed and bit, hearing a panic-stricken man's confession. Within the hut, his wife, his little daughter and infant son, all newly baptized, lay dying. The sickness had not touched him, but its visitation to his home did what years of coaxing, prodding and reminding had failed to do.

164 A primitive people like the Shilluk fall an easy prey to
744 whatever sickness is going. Not overclean in their persons and insanitary in their habits, they huddle together at night in small windowless huts with the doorway blocked by a heavy grass mat; hence disease quickly spreads from person to person, from hut to hut and from village to village. Medical facilities are limited and an epidemic can get a good hold before effective reinforcements can be sent from Malakal, sixty miles away, to help the overworked Medical Assistant. During my first years at Detwok, cerebro-spinal meningitis was a regular annual visitor. It came when the rains ceased, and with the first showers of the next rainy season it disappeared again, but during the intervening months it did its deadly work and scarcely a day passed without some village mourning its dead. An effective remedy was found, however, in a spinal injection of the famous 'M & B' drug, and the scourge lost much of its terror. After 1942 it failed to put in its annual appearance, and to date Detwok and district has been free of it altogether, although yearly it makes its presence felt in the southern end of the province, and takes a deadly toll in other provinces in the Sudan.